

Comics: Meet the Artist With Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins Co-authors, "Shoe"
Hosted by Suzanne Tobin
Washington Post Comics Editor
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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion,
hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

For over 20 years, "Shoe" has been a staple daily doses of humor in the Comics section. Originally created by Jeff MacNelly, Chris Cassatt, Gary Brookins and MacNelly's widow, Susie MacNelly, have kept the cartoon strip alive since McNelly's death in June, 2000. Cassatt and Brookins were online Friday, July 20 at 1 p.m. EDT to answer questions and take comments about their daily cartoon.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, everyone to the Lucky No. 7 edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guests are Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins, who are carrying on the legacy of "Jeff MacNelly's Shoe," after Jeff's passing on June 8, 2000. Chris had been working with Jeff on "Shoe" since 1992, doing computer work to help Jeff streamline the production of the strip. And Gary started working with Jeff in 1996, and came on board to help with "Shoe" in June of '99, in order to give Jeff more time to doing painting and sculpting, which he loved. Welcome, Chris and Gary, and thanks for joining us today.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: This is Gary, and it's great to be here and I'm flattered to be asked to do this chat. To give your readers a little background, I became the editorial cartoonist at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, a morning paper, in January of 1979 and have been there ever since. I originally met Jeff MacNelly because he was the editorial cartoonist at the afternoon paper, the Richmond News-Leader, since 1970. Both papers were owned by the same company, and were housed in the same building so I got quite a few pointers from Jeff on inking with a brush, which I how I learned my trade. And then he moved on to Chicago in about '83, and eventually the two papers merged in '92, and I'm still here.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: This is Chris, and I'm talking to you all from Aspen, Colorado, and I'm delighted to be here and so glad that "Shoe" is in your paper.

Suzanne Tobin: That's is Chris, always a good thing to kiss up to the client.

Marietta, Ga.: How difficult was it to continue "Shoe" after Jeff's death? Also, are either of you planning to go into editorial cartooning?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here, let me handle this question. Because we had already been in production together, the three of us, for more than a year before Jeff's illness, we just kept doing what we had been doing when Jeff got sick, expecting that he

would get better, and so we just jumped in and it was a pretty seamless transition.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here, I'd just like to add onto Chris' comments. Chris had worked with Jeff for more than 8 years, at that point, and so he knew the whole strip backwards and forwards, and so he just kept doing what he had been doing all along. Even the folks at the syndicate couldn't tell the difference when we took over completely on our own.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here again. Jeff often said that I loved the strip even more than he did. I was a No. 1 "Shoe" fan. I even remember where I was when the strip premiered. I was sitting on my brother-in-law and sister-in-law's patio in Claremont, Calif. where I was visiting when I first saw "Shoe" in the Progress-Bulletin. (My sister-in-law is now, by the way, the MAYOR of Claremont.)

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. But he doesn't remember where he was when Kennedy was shot. But then again, I, too, remember the first time that I saw "Shoe." I was working in television in Panama City, Fla., my hometown, and opened up the News-Herald and there was a half page ad announcing that "Shoe" was coming to that paper. But what was amazing, was, at that time, I was working on developing a new strip that was about some birds, and the lead character was a crow that looked a lot like Shoe. (Although Shoe is a purple martin.) Believe me, I had real mixed feelings when I saw that, since Jeff had beat me to the punch. But it IS rather strange, that 24 years later, here I am working on "Shoe." (Cue the "Twilight

Zone" music.)

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. My immediate reaction to "Shoe," was that it made me sick, because it was so good.

Herndon, Va.: Gentlemen: Do you ever find yourselves discussing the strip and asking each other "What would Jeff do?"

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. Jeff was a real intellect, and he sometimes would write over people's heads. We don't have that problem.

Chicago, Ill.: I Love SHOE! It seems funnier than ever. Is that possible?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris again. The bottom line these days is it has to be funny. We go out of our way to make every gag great. We use a couple of gag writers, including Chuck Smith of The Washington Post "Style Invitational" fame. Jeff had hired Chuck around '93 or '94 to do "sparks," which are just nuggets of ideas. And then Jeff would take it from there. And that helped take some of the pressure off Jeff. It IS a lot of pressure to come up with a killer gag every day.

The way Gary and I work, is, after I've received all the gags from my writers, and put it with the stuff that Gary and I have written, I edit the pile down from about 100 gags to 25-30 possibilities for one week. Then I call Susie MacNelly down on her farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, and read them to her. It's a blind test, in that I don't tell her who wrote what. Then I rate them on a scale of

1 to 5, depending on how hard she laughs. And so we choose among those.

Look for the Aug. 26 Sunday comic, she laughed for a good minute and a half on that one. (Thank you, Bill Linden, from Chicago, whose gag it was.)

Arlington, Va.: How much of Jeff the conservative editorial cartoonist found its way into Jeff the artist of "Shoe", and how do you two try to maintain that now if neither of you is as conservative as he was?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. I think I AM as conservative. It's not a problem for me!

Chris here. I'm not a conservative at all. And I can prove it, because I don't understand golf.

Chris again. Really, the strip is gag driven.

Gary again. Yeah, that's right, there's no political agenda.

Washington, D.C.: Just who is the model for the Senator character in your comic? When I was younger he looked to me like Tip O'Neill; now he looks more like Ted Kennedy. Is the cartoon in fact, supposed to be Robert Byrd?

I've always been curious about this, and have really enjoyed your comic for a long time.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. It used to be Ted Kennedy, but now he's a composite of corrupt politicians, both left and right.

Jeff originally patterned Sen. Belfry's look on Tip O'Neill. At that time, Ted Kennedy still had dark hair and was a little slimmer, but he's since kind of grown into the appearance of the character.

Silver Spring, Md.: One of my favorite parts of "Shoe" was Skyler going off to camp and ending up in the Marine Corps. He doesn't do that anymore. Will he do it again? Thanks, and I love the strip!

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. Thanks for the compliment. We plan to do a camp series again next summer. One of our most requested books is a private book that Jeff put out called "So That's Why They Call It Boot Camp," which was all about Skyler's military experience. It was a fundraiser for the Navy Relief Fund, and it's so far out of print that you'll never find it. But we may bring the book back at some point and add more to it.

Columbus, Ohio: I heard that Mr. MacNelly hadn't used a brush and ink since the mid-nineties because he found that using a computer drawing pad made drawing editorial cartoons easier. Are you headed in that direction, Mr. Brookins? Also, will you be attending the cartoon convention in Columbus this September?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. Jeff actually started us which is about the side of a legal pad. It's a cordless stylus. You draw on the tablet, and it shows up on the computer screen. Chris taught Jeff how to use it and Photoshop. And I (Gary) began using it shortly after that. And so you can say that "Shoe" is totally digital. There's no paper and ink involved anymore.

Chris again. What convinced Jeff to go with the Wacom was that it had been Susie's job to scan the cartoons, so that I could come pick them up out of his computer for distribution. Susie hated scanning, so the digital tablet put the image directly in the computer, so Jeff didn't have to ask Susie to scan anymore.

Some people thought it was a travesty, but it made it more efficient all the way around.

Gary again. People seem to forget that we're drawing this stuff for reproduction in the newspaper, and the originals really aren't all that important. Also, you can get some effects on the computer that you can't get with traditional materials.

And, lastly, we have no plans to go to Columbus. We only plan a week at a time.

Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Please allow me to simply say that while Mr. MacNally could never really be replaced, you have done an admirable job of carrying on the digs and scratches to institution of idiocy. Shoe has continued in a fashion that warrants thanks.

Jerry J

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Many, many, many thanks. You are too kind.

Las Vegas, Nev.: Speaking of books: is there product on the market with this "new" gag-driven Shoe? I've also been a fan for a very long time.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. We have two "Shoe" books and a collection of editorial cartoons in the works. The first "Shoe" book will be the last of Jeff's work, and the next one will be the first collection of ours. That one will probably be called "Big Shoes to Fill." We hope to have them both out by Christmas. Check on our Web site, macnelly.com, for details.

Ann Arbor, Mich.: If SHOE is a purple martin, what types of birds are the other characters? By the way, SHOE is great!

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. We're so glad you like the strip. Cosmo P. Fishhawk is actually an osprey. Loon is, of

course, a loon. I'm not sure what Roz is, but she's a real piece of work and she's actually Susie (not that Susie is a piece of work). Irv is a seagull.

Fairfax, Va. /Former Richmonder: Gary -- Are you still doing "Pluggers" in the RTD? Also, other than your own strip, what is your favorite must read comic?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. Yes, I'm still doing "Pluggers," which is also syndicated by Tribune Media, and it is in the Times-Dispatch and about 80 other paper. It has the distinction of being the only "reader-written" strip out there. For those of you not familiar with it, "Pluggers" is about the everyday working folks who keep plugging along, and all the ideas come from the readers, who are given credit in the panel. If you want to check it out, go to pluggers.com.

As for my favorite, I'd have to say "Zits," because I've had three teenage boys and a fourth son that's almost there, and they have a real handle on that age

North Potomac, Md.: Not a question, but a compliment. I'm amazed how closely the strip follows Jeff's work. It's one of the most enjoyable comic strips available.

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. Thanks so much. I always want on to add on to Gary's last comment, my favorite is probably "Sherman's Lagoon," and Mike Peters' "Mother Goose and Grimm." You have to realize that Mike is the one who introduced me to Jeff.

Woodbridge, Va.: Well if the comic is gag driven, then how do you keep character personalities? What's the hardest part of doing a comic strip?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. The personalities are well established. The loon is an idiot, the senator is a corrupt lush, and Shoe is a cigar-chomping curmudgeon. And Professor Cosmo is a slob. I most closely to Cosmo. So did Jeff. Jeff also saw Skyler as his 13-year-old self.

As to your last question, there is no hard part. How many jobs are there in the world where you can work in your underwear. It's written in the National Cartoonists' Society bylaws that you have to spend at least 3 days a week working in your underwear.

Gary here. I'd like to add that the hardest part is hauling all the money to the bank.

Chris here. I'd like you to haul it to MY bank for a change.

Columbus, Ohio: What's your guys' view of the "state of the funnies?" Meaning, what's your take on the new trends in comic strips?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. They call it the funny pages for a reason. There's a lot of new stuff that's great, like "Get Fuzz.," My kids like "Get Fuzzy" better than "Shoe," which hurts my feelings.

Woodbridge, Va.: In your job, have you met anybody famous? Do you know the President? Who helped you the most in your cartooning career? What advice do you have for beginning cartoonists? Have you ever thought of writing a book on cartooning?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary here. I really have a hard time encouraging anyone to pursue a career in cartooning, because it's so competitive. For every strip that a syndicate will launch, they have looked at 5,000. And half of those that are launched will fail within

two years.

Chris here. There are fewer cartoonists than there are congressman.
Gary here. Well, I had lunch with President Reagan. And I went to the Gridiron Dinner this past year, and of course the President and Mrs. Bush and Vice President and Mrs. Cheney were there. But I'm not in this for that.

Chris here. I met Ringo Starr on a mountain in Aspen once, but he had no idea who I was.

Columbus, Ohio: When is the Jeff MacNelly homepage going to get updated with a more extensive archive of his political cartoons and when is Gary going to get a great Web site going with his editorial cartoons? Also, are you guys planning on coming to Columbus in Sept. for the cartoon convention?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Chris here. We've got about six months of Jeff's editorial cartoons on macnelly.com. It's just a matter of finding the time to build them into the Web site.

Gary here. You can find mine on timesdispatch.com in the editorial section. They have a pretty good archive there.

Fairfax, Va.: What other comic strips do you two enjoy and admire?

Chris Cassatt and Gary Brookins: Gary AND Chris here. I think we answered your question above. And, Suzanne, I'm sorry we have to go. We're out of time. This has been a real pleasure, let's do it again some time.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks so much. guys! You were GREAT fun. I'll look forward to your upcoming compilations. And, folks, if you didn't get your question posted, you can e-mail Chris at macnelly.com, there's an e-mail button. And Gary can be reached at gbrookins@timesdispatch.com. Join us again in two weeks when we'll meet another talented cartoonist.